

## Natural Resources Conservation Service



**Rick & Kathy Kaesebier, Logan County**

## A Different Kind of Farm Expansion...

### A Short History

With 640 acres in Central Illinois, Rick and Kathy run a diverse and sustainable farm. They grow corn, soybeans, wheat, and now they have chickens, feeder cows, and sheep. They were a “regular farm” until they brought the chickens on in 2012. According to Rick, “It all started getting different. I think chickens were the ‘gateway’ livestock for us. There was no turning back!”

The Kaesebiers began farming in the 1980’s. They used a lot of cheap Nitrogen and raised 160-bushel corn. Grain marketing was easy--with so little movement in the markets. In the mid-1990’s they went no-till with soybeans; ten years later they went no-till with corn.

In 2016 they brought on four cows and started a five-month finishing regime—take in 800-pound cattle

and sell off 1,400-pound grass grazed, value-added beef.

In 2018 they took on six sheep and one sweet donkey to serve as their “Guardian.” The smaller livestock were easy and safer to manage and required so little pasture to be profitable. Finding reasonable butcher services was initially a challenge, but finding customers interested in buying locally grown and grazed meat was not. Today, they average a herd of 20 to 30.

Even before the livestock, Rick and Kathy heard about and eagerly jumped on board the Soil Health wave, tapping into both state and federal cover crop incentives. “We’ve been planting commodity cash crops right into green, growing cover crops since 2017. In 2018, we started grazing those cover crops,” Rick explains.

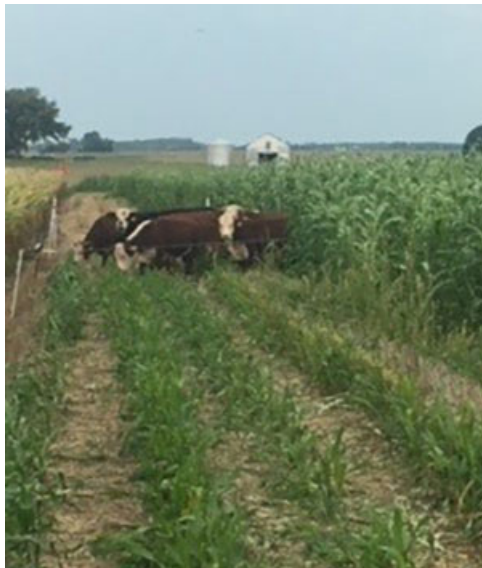
They worked with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service

(NRCS) since 2018, starting with a Nutrient Management Plan and cover crops. They installed regular conservation solutions including grassed waterways. The Conservation Stewardship Program, or CSP, was a perfect fit. Now with livestock, pasture, and rotational grazing as a key part of their farm, they may pursue the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to address water facilities and other needs that require significant time and labor.

### Rooted in Stewardship

Taking care of the land, the soil, and following national and global trends towards more sustainable and smart agriculture has always been at the heart of Rick’s strategy. “The assistance, conservation practices and techniques offered by NRCS staff and programs just makes sense. It helps us do what we want to do,” Rick explains.





The first time they turned cattle out to graze cover crops, that's when folks really took notice of how different things were on this Logan County farm.

"It wasn't 30 minutes later, and I got a text message from a guy telling me 'you can't put cattle out on this good Central Illinois farm ground.' Of course, he was kidding, as he was one of the few other guys around here who DOES that," says Rick.

"Between the cover crops, planting 'green,' and then letting cattle graze them, I'm sure the coffee shop crews had enough on me to keep them busy for a few days."



Rick still uses no-till today. His goal? Have 15 different plants growing on each acre every four years. Adding wheat into the rotation and a cover crop mix with 10 -12 different warm- and cool-season species, and grazing it wisely, he accomplishes just that.

According to Kaesebiers, they are a fairly small farm operation but there's a lot happening on that land. They wanted to do more and to expand. And they did. They expanded acres VERTICALLY instead of horizontally.

"Instead of MORE horizontal cropped acres, we enhanced what we had and add to it with different enterprises and new approaches and strategies. Instead of more crop and yield returns, we have several different ways to generate income and profit," Rick explains.

"I focus on Return On Investment, not just counting bushels or gross dollars. We reduce the amount of checks we write OUT so we can increase the checks that are coming IN."



## Value-Added = More Profit

It wasn't long before Kathy announced the farm's next value-added addition: honeybees! They manage between three and ten hives, and bottle/sell delicious natural honey. Kathy now serves as Treasurer of the Prairie State Beekeeper and the Illinois State Beekeepers Associations.

Even though Kathy is highly allergic to bee stings (and found that out the hard way), it made so much sense, they forward on with an Epi-pen nearby-- just in case!



Kaesebiers found the best thing about using cover crops and grazing and integrating all these natural elements together is the return on investment.

"It's been nice. We've reduced input costs. In some situations, sizably so. We do the Haney soil tests and other sorts of tissue tests to learn exactly what we need instead of what we THINK we need. We've done nitrogen testing to get a better idea what the soils are actually going to return to us organically, so we don't need to provide everything else in some expensive and synthetic form," Rick adds.

## Making Friends

What might surprise you is who this small, Central Illinois farming team has talked to and learned from and spent quality time with so they could truly figure out the whole soil health,





microbiology, and cover crop thing. Do these names ring a bell—Gabe Brown, David Brandt, Don Huber, or Greg Judy?

Gabe Brown came out to Rick's farm in 2017 for a field day. He stayed at their place and spent the night, so they had time to really talk. Brandt came out in 2021 and gave a presentation. Rick helped pulled together a handful of curious and motivated area farmers, pooled resources, and BOUGHT Greg Judy for a whole day.

"We spent eight to ten hours with him, asked ALL our questions, picked his brain about grazing enterprises and all the possibilities. We did the same thing with Allen Williams," Rick says.

All this communication and contact with highly intelligent people who are doing these things has helped them make good decisions and learn to try different approaches. Rick encourages other farmers to do the same or find new ways to learn and find solutions that work.

The longer you talk to these two, the more projects, programs, collaborative efforts you find out they've been involved with—the Illinois S.T.A.R. (Saving tomorrow's Ag Resources) program, The Pasture Project, American Farmland Trust, S.A.R.E.—if there's somebody willing to talk, share, track data, or learn, and teach, Rick is THERE.



According to Rick and Kathy, there are endless people and organizations out there to help you find success. "You need them. You need that network to talk you down when you think you're off your rocker or too close to the edge. That network becomes vital. We need it—we all need each other—more than ever," Rick adds.

Rick and Kathy are always conducting small trials using different techniques, timing, planting and seeding rates—there's so many options and so much to try and learn. Working with wheat and playing with the timing—like how long to wait and what rate to plant brassicas at so they don't shade out the other species too soon.

"Find someone to call, someone to ask. You don't have to do this alone. Learn about their mistakes, make your own, and learn to laugh about them too," adds Rick.

## Cover Crop Cocktail Mix

It includes: Winter Peas, Hairy Vetch, Rapeseed/Canola, Cereal Rye, Sorghum Sudan grass, Sun hemp, flaxseed, phacelia, Ethiopian cabbage, buckwheat, Balansa clover, Crimson clover, Oats, Triticale, Pearl Millet, sunflowers, and Soybeans.

Rick is a big believer in roller crimpers because they offer so many possibilities. He's seen different planter set-ups that were simply amazing. He's seen corn growing in cover crop mulch where the brace roots were actually below the mulch. "That's how much cover and life and organic matter these systems can deliver. You do that



for 5 or 10 years? It transforms your soil and your need for fungicides and insecticides. You'll grow healthier soils and healthier plants. You'll use less chemicals and treatments and save money," Rick adds.

One thing Rick wants new cover crop farmers to know is that you can't always adopt or copy exactly what someone else does on their farm, on their soils, on their operation. Listen and learn and then ADAPT it to your situation. Apply their ideas to your own goals for the future.

To learn more about NRCS conservation programs and practices, visit [www.il.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.il.nrcs.usda.gov) or visit your local county USDA Service Center today.

